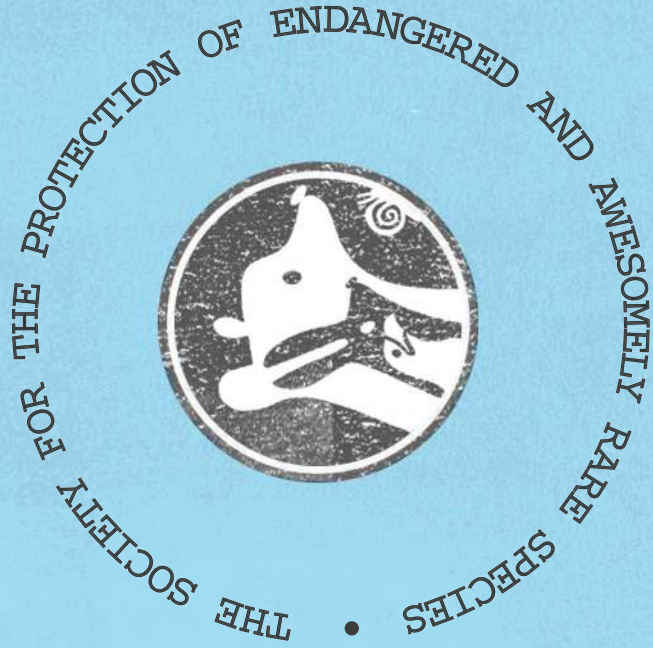


AGENTS OF THE WILD

OPERATION ICEBEAK



JENNIFER BELL & ALICE LICKENS





For Charlotte
J.B.

For Ida, my tiny, perfect tyrant
A.L.

A special thanks to design whizz Jamie Hammond

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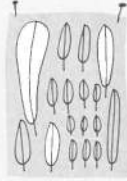
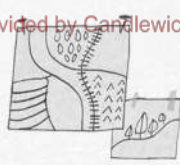
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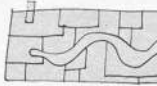
PROLOGUE





Eight-year-old Agnes Gamble stuck her head under her bed and considered how much her life had changed.

When she'd first come to stay with her uncle Douglas, he'd forbidden her from having any pets *and* refused her entirely reasonable offers to turn the spare room of their twenty-sixth-floor flat into a refuge for lost and injured birds.



Caring for the natural world, you see, was in Agnes's DNA. Her late parents (the famous botanists Ranulph and Azalea Gamble) had taught her all the important things she knew, like how to repair the nest of a red ovenbird; what kind of figs to feed a Bulmer's fruit bat, and the right way to treat stem rust fungus.

Douglas didn't appreciate that sort of thing.

"It'll only die," he'd told Agnes, after she'd given him a potted hydrangea for his birthday one year. "And anyway, there's no space for it in the kitchen. I want to get a new coffee machine."

Every birthday since, she'd given him a tie. It was kinder to plants.

But *now* Agnes had a secret.

Hidden under her bed, behind a tray of rare aloe seedlings she'd been incubating over winter, was a carefully folded uniform. It was made of waterproof, fireproof and mosquito-proof material and there was a small badge pinned to the chest pocket with the letters **S P E A R S** written on it.

"SPEARS," *you say? "Never heard of them!"*

Well, of course you haven't. **SPEARS** are the Society for the Protection of Endangered and Awesomely Rare Species, and they're **TOP SECRET**.

You probably haven't heard of the sparkle-muffin peacock spider either.

Or the pink fairy armadillo.

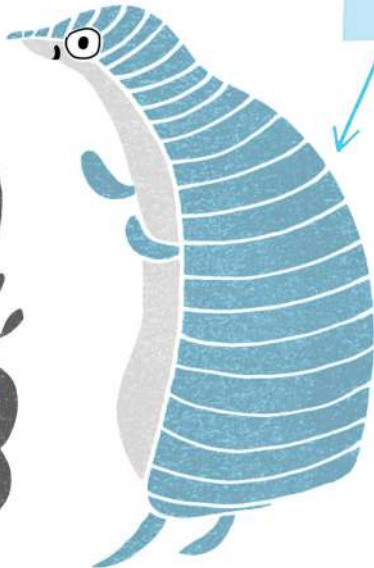
Or the red-lipped batfish.

And that's because they're all *awesomely rare*, and exactly the kind of species **SPEARS** tries to protect.

SPARKLE-
MUFFIN
PEACOCK
SPIDER



PINK FAIRY
ARMADILLO



RED-LIPPED
BATFISH



Agnes had been surprised by some of the plants and animals she'd encountered during her work for **SPEARS**, but then she'd only completed one mission so far, and she was still learning. She was now a permanent **SPEARS** field agent, working alongside her partner, Attie – a seriously impressive and impressively serious elephant shrew.

Whenever Agnes ran her fingers over the **SPEARS** badge on her uniform, she was reminded that she was now a part of something bigger, something that her parents – who had also been **SPEARS** agents – had been a part of too. She knew that if she and Attie could help protect the world's flora and fauna as they had, she'd be making them proud.



And so every morning Agnes crawled under her bed to check on her uniform, determined to be ready for whenever **SPEARS** might call...



CHAPTER ONE



There were strange noises coming from the kitchen. Agnes sat bolt upright in bed, knowing that it was long past midnight and Uncle Douglas would have fallen asleep hours ago. She listened carefully to the muffled creaking and scratching. It sounded as if someone was rummaging around.

Her curiosity building, she slipped on her hedgehog-shaped slippers, padded quietly out of her bedroom and ventured along the hallway towards the kitchen.

Passing the waste bin, Agnes noticed that her uncle had – once *again* – stuffed yesterday’s newspaper into the wrong bin, so she fished it out and moved it into the recycling. The headline on the front page briefly caught her eye: MYSTERIOUS

TREMORS FELT IN SCOTIA SEA. The Scotia Sea, she knew, was under the southern tip of South America. She hoped no wildlife had been affected.



She tiptoed past Douglas's bedroom door (she could hear him snoring) and into the shadowy kitchen, where she immediately discovered the cause of all the racket:

It was the refrigerator.

Or more precisely, it was something moving around *inside* the refrigerator.

Without hesitation, she gripped the door handle and yanked it open.

A small, four-legged animal with an elongated nose was standing on top of the butter dish. Its fur was chili-red on its head and jet-black everywhere else, except for two white rings around its eyes that made it look as if it was wearing spectacles.

"Attie?" Agnes exclaimed. Her **SPEARS** partner was easy to recognize, despite the unexpected place in which she'd found him.



He was dressed in a neatly ironed ice-blue **SPEARS** onesie which had a long, padded section for his tail, built-in gloves and a hood fitted with a transparent visor. “What are you *doing* in there?”

Attie’s whiskers wiggled. “I’m trying to open the hidden passage behind this fridge, but it’s proving rather difficult.” A light flashed on the **SPEARS** communication pin fixed to his top pocket, which allowed Agnes to understand what he was saying. “**SPEARS** installed it a few weeks ago.”

“A *hidden passage*?” Agnes knew that the organization had secret tunnels and bases all over the world, but she hadn’t anticipated they would fit one in Uncle Douglas’s apartment.

“There’s a code that unlocks the door in the wall right behind the fridge,” Attie

explained, swapping around the different coloured grapes in a bowl. “I just can’t quite–” there was a loud click “–aha, cracked it! Red, red, green, red, green, green. I should have known.”

There was a secret grape code? Agnes quickly tried to commit it to memory as the back of the refrigerator slid away to reveal a dark corridor in the wall behind. A waft of cool air brushed past her, smelling of damp earth. “Where does it lead?”



“To an underground **SPEARS** equipment station on the other side of the city,” Attie answered, rearranging the grapes back to their original positions. “We’ve been tasked with our second mission and we need to head there immediately.”

Our second mission! Agnes whipped out her “Field Notes” journal and a ready-sharpened pencil from her pyjama pocket – she carried both with her at all times.

“What do we know so far?” she asked, turning to a clean page.

Right then, a chimp wearing identical pyjamas and hedgehog slippers to Agnes appeared inside the hidden passage. It

squeezed past Attie, jumped out of the fridge and landed nimbly on the kitchen floor,





catching one of Uncle Douglas’s ready meals in its hand.

“Ralph!” Careful not to jab the chimp with her pencil, Agnes gave him a hug. She’d grown fond of him while he’d been covering for her whenever she was away doing **SPEARS** training. Trained to only ever be seen from behind, Ralph was so good at mimicking Agnes’s appearance that Uncle Douglas had

never noticed the difference.

He beamed at her and then plodded off towards her bedroom with the ready meal tucked under his arm.

“He’s probably in a hurry,” Attie commented, reshuffling the contents of the fridge so there was space for Agnes to clamber in. “There’s a new Cynthia Steelsharp documentary starting on TV in a few minutes and Ralph’s a huge fan.”

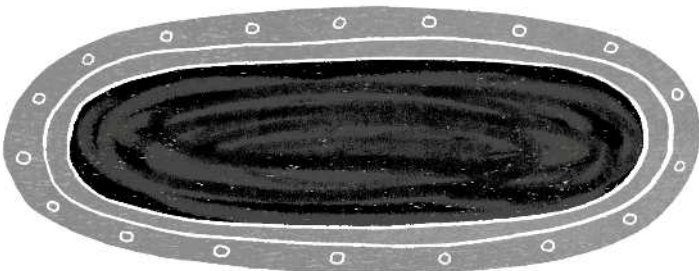
Agnes heard a twinge of disappointment in Attie’s voice. Cynthia Steelsharp, she knew, was also one of *his* favourite animal experts. She’d won several awards for her studies of the planet’s most endangered birds.

Attie grabbed a container of banana slices from the fridge (ingredients for his favourite pumpkin-seed-and-fried-banana sandwiches)

and bounded into the hidden passage. Agnes returned her “Field Notes” journal and pencil to her pocket and crawled after him.

The dusty brick-lined tunnel beyond was so dark Agnes couldn’t see where it ended, but after only a few metres, Attie stopped beside a large hole in the floor which seemed to narrow as it plunged deeper.

“This speed funnel will take us straight to the equipment station,” he said, flicking his padded tail as he balanced on the funnel’s edge. “I’ll see you at the bottom.” With the elegance of a kingfisher, he dived head first into the opening, slid round and round on his tummy and then disappeared into the hole at the bottom.



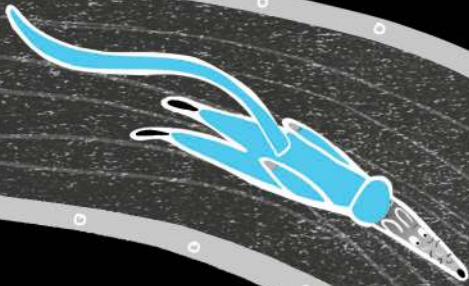
Agnes sat down and swung her legs into the funnel opening, trying to steady her nerves. She was doing important work for **SPEARS** now; she couldn't let herself be daunted by anything. Pushing off with her hands, she slipped forward, spiralled round and plunged into darkness. "Attie-e-e-!" she spluttered, whizzing along. "Where are wee go-ing?"

His reply echoed back to her. "An-tar-tee-ca!"

Agnes flinched. Had she heard him right?



A moment later, she left the tunnel and landed on a soft straw mat in the corner of a large cave. “Did you say *Antarctica*?” she asked breathlessly. Her parents had once adventured to the South Pole to study Antarctic hair grass. Afterwards, they’d told Agnes stories of a vast white wilderness, home to specially adapted wildlife. It had sounded incredible.



“That’s right,” Attie said, puffing up his chest. “**SPEARS** must think highly of us because Antarctica is a dangerous place, and they’d only send their best agents.”

Marching through the cave (which was lit by millions of glowing railroad worms), Agnes glanced at his outfit. “Now I understand why you’re wearing a onesie. It’s to keep you warm.”

“A *onesie*?” Attie jerked his head. “**SPEARS** agents do not wear *onesies*, Agent Gamble! This is a watertight thermal bodysuit, designed using technology inspired by Antarctic silverfish. You’ll be wearing one too, soon.”

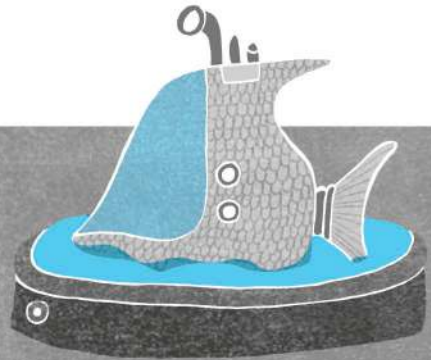
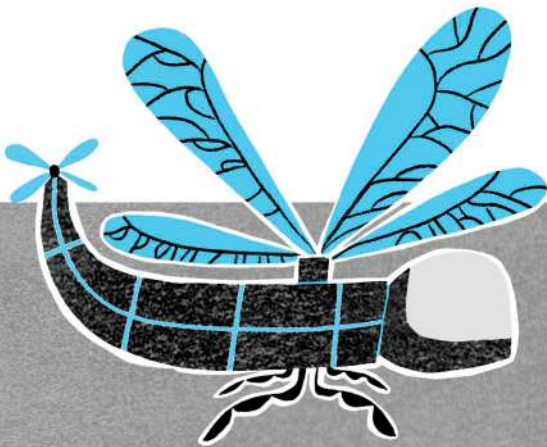
As he walked faster, muttering “onesie” under his breath and shaking his head, Agnes considered how his suit might work.

SPEARS technology was based on the science of the natural world and Agnes had a vague memory of her dad teaching her that Antarctic silverfish produce their own natural antifreeze in order to survive in sub-zero temperatures. Perhaps when underwater, the thermal bodysuit used antifreeze too.



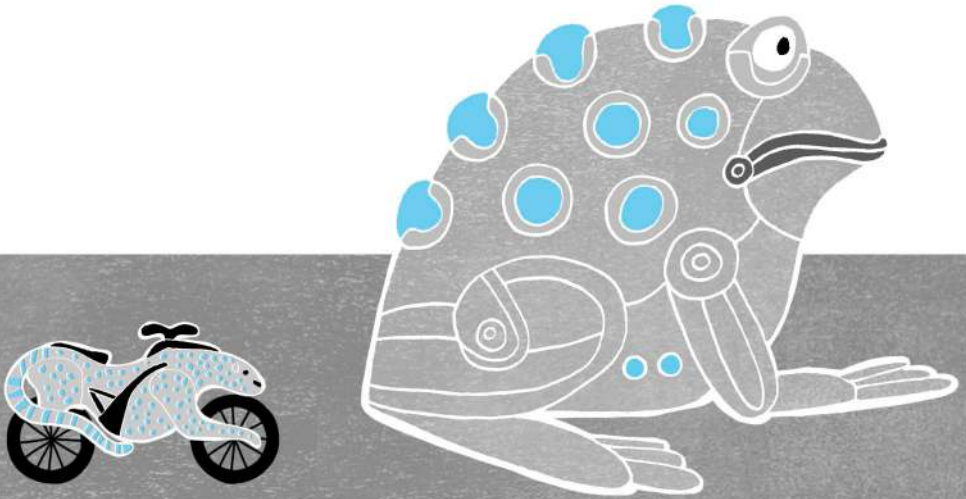
The cave soon widened into an enormous space filled with peculiar vehicles. Agnes spied a dragoncopter and an albatross glider like those she'd ridden on her last mission, but also a hovercraft with spindly insect antennae, a sleek cheetah-shaped motorbike and a submarine covered in glittering fish scales. Attie stopped beside a vessel shaped like a giant toad with a lumpy transparent back.

“This is our means of transport for the journey to Antarctica,” Attie announced,



gesturing at the toad-shaped craft. “It’s capable of travelling on land and in water, so we call it an omnifrog.” He spread his claws over a scanner on the outer wall and, with a hiss, a set of steps unfolded from the omnifrog’s mouth.

Agnes understood where the vessel’s name had come from. Frogs were *amphibians*, which meant that like the omnifrog, they were specially adapted to survive in water and on land.



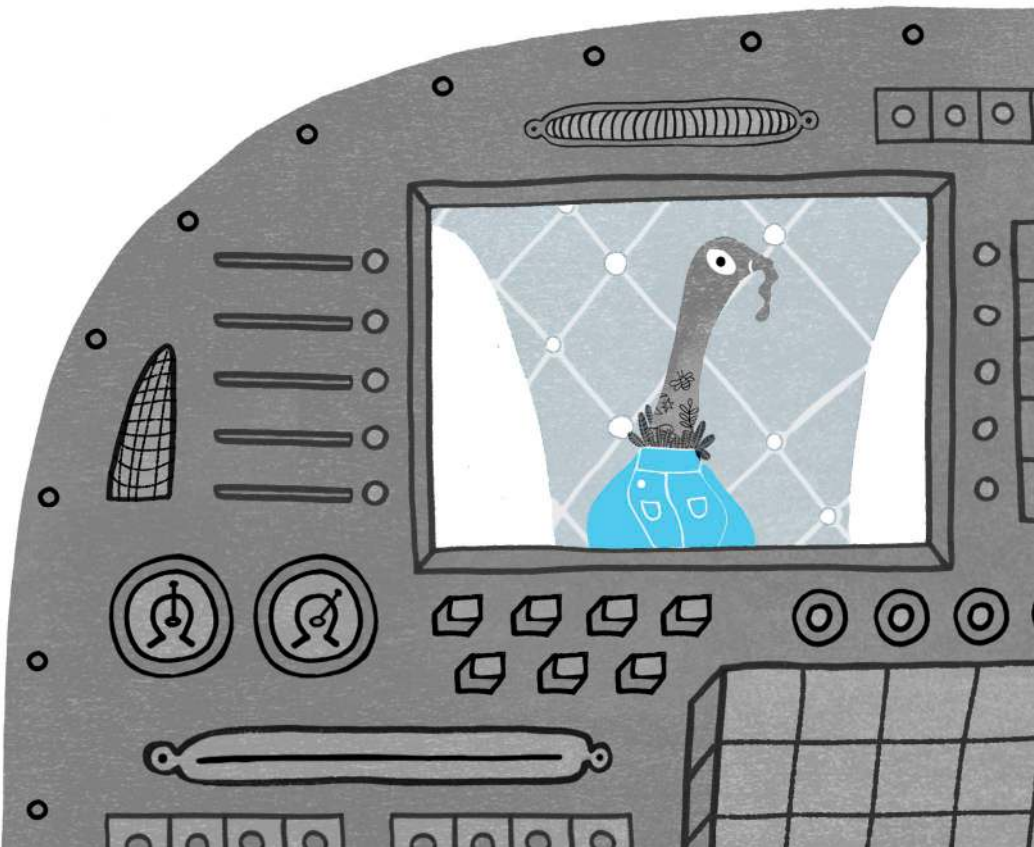
Inside, the omnifrog was spotlessly clean and smelled of lemon disinfectant. Agnes found a child-sized thermal bodysuit hanging from a peg and wriggled into it as she listened to Attie's instructions. Pointing with his tail, he showed her where their new colour-coded equipment was stored, which she would need to learn about during the journey.

Taking the chair beside Attie, Agnes fumbled with her seat belt, a mixture of nerves and excitement bubbling inside her. In front of them was a control panel crammed with various buttons, levers and switches. Attie turned a dial, and, with a loud croak, the engine of the omnifrog started. The walls of the vessel shook as it sank below the surface, sending a cloud of bubbles

swirling over the glass panels in the roof. Agnes could see a dark tunnel up ahead.

“We’ve received this message from **SPEARS HQ**,” Attie said, flicking a switch.

A screen lit up, showing the image of a portly turkey sitting with his wings folded across his belly and a severe expression on his wrinkly pink face. It was Commander Phil, the fearless leader of **SPEARS**.



“Agents Attenborough and Gamble, I have an urgent assignment for you,” the Commander said in a gruff voice that made his throat wobble. “We have received a Level *Ten* distress call from an underwater **SPEARS** outpost in Antarctica.” His image moved to the left-hand side of the screen as a map appeared on the right-hand side. It displayed the jagged ice-white continent of Antarctica with a flashing red cross in the Weddell Sea, north-west of the Antarctic Peninsula.

A Level Ten distress call? Agnes’s chest tightened as she glanced at Attie. Level Ten was code for: IMMEDIATE DANGER.

“Three **SPEARS** agents are stationed at the outpost,” the Commander continued. “The nature of their distress call is unclear

because their communications equipment has been damaged, so it is even more vital that you reach them quickly to learn what's happened." His chest feathers ruffled as he added, "Our **SPEARS** family is in trouble and we need *you*. Good luck."

The image on the screen faded and a long reel of paper emerged from a slit in the control panel. Agnes read it as fast as she could.

MISSION NAME:

OPERATION ICEBEAK

MISSION TYPE:

Aid and investigate

ASSIGNED EQUIPMENT:

Omnifrog, trinoculars,
supersonic otter
sled and telescopic
giraffe stilts